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ABRAHAM LINCOLN

ADDRESS

OF

HON. WILLIAM A. RODENBERG

OF ILLINOIS

IN THE

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN.

Mr. RODENBERG. Mr. Speaker, fivescore and seven years ago to-day the star of destiny shone resplendent over the cradle of an infant boy who, in the years to follow, was to be acclaimed by history as one of America's grandest contributions to the world's heritage of great and noble men. On that day, in a cabin home, amid the hills of Kentucky, Abraham Lincoln was born, and on this anniversary of his birth the memory of that great and Godlike life thrills the soul of every American, giving him an inspiration of true nobility. [Applause.]

Abraham Lincoln! What a flood of mighty memories is awakened by that name. What a glorious panorama of patriotic achievement it presents to view. How it seems to fathom the very depths of duty and devotion, the innermost springs of sympathy and of sorrow. As we pronounce it reverently to-day the trials and tragedies and triumphs of the Nation's supremest struggle pass again in review before us and, rising above the stress and strife of conflict, grand and majestic, like some tall cliff "that midway leaves the storm," we behold the one great central figure of that epoch of heroism, the one never-failing beacon light of national patriotism—our Lincoln—the world's Lincoln. [Applause.]

As I attempt to-day to pay tribute to a personality so great, a character so grand, so complex, and yet so simple, I am overwhelmed with a sense of my inability to do even partial justice to his name and fame. I shall content myself, therefore, with a brief reference to a few of his great traits of character which I believe have left a profound and lasting impression upon the American mind.

Why is it that no other name in the long roll of distinguished American statesmen stirs the heart of the Nation so deeply as that of Abraham Lincoln? Orators never weary of singing his praise, and hearers never tire of listening. Books on Lincoln multiply each year, and interest in them never flags. Every trivial relic of his homely life, every scrap of his writing, every prophetic saying, every jest, every anecdote, is treasured to-day by the people and bequeathed by them "as a rich legacy unto their issue."

It is not enough to say that Lincoln was a wise and patriotic President who died a martyr to a great cause. We have had other wise and devoted Presidents, and he is not the only martyr, but there is only one Lincoln. Washington we reverence, Jackson we admire, Lincoln we love. His memory is enshrined more deeply in the heart of the Nation than that of any other man, and there is none so close as he to the source of tears and of emotion.

This can not be explained by the fact that Lincoln rose by manly effort from the humblest ranks of backwoods life to the highest position in the gift of any people. It can not be accounted for by the fact that he was a noble embodiment of that splendid spirit of self-reliance that is bred of generations of lonely

struggle under the shadow of the forest primeval. It is not even because he signed the great proclamation of emancipation.

These things are a part of the reason for the esteem in which we hold Lincoln, and so are his inexhaustible humor, his intense earnestness, his tireless industry, his honesty and fairness, his courage, and his steadfastness of purpose. His homely and unaffected words and ways had something to do with his popularity, and so had his sturdy common sense. But not all of these sterling traits could make a Lincoln without something additional; nor is the secret revealed by naming what is usually regarded as the crowning trait of his magnificent character—the fact that he always sought the right as God gave him to see the right, and that he devoted his life to a steadfast pursuance of it when once he was convinced he had found it. This will explain much, but it will never explain the flood of tender emotion that wells up from American hearts at mention of his incomparable name.

Mr. Speaker, I believe that the true secret of our love for Lincoln was his own love for his fellow man. [Applause.] In his ungainly, giant form there was a heart of infinite human sympathy, and this it was that illumined all his other traits of greatness and has made the imperishable halo that lingers around his head. [Applause.] Without these he might have achieved greatness, might have become President, might have freed the slaves as a political necessity, might even have brought the war to a successful close, and have fallen a victim to an assassin's bullet, and yet we should not to-day be speaking of him as we do. It is this one supreme trait of human sympathy that carries his name out of the realm of intellect into that of emotion. [Applause.]

It was this same deep human sympathy that caused Lincoln to hate slavery and to throw all of the power of his logic and eloquence against it. It was this, too, that enabled him to hold that marvelous balance of judgment which could put the Union above all else and could hold back emancipation until the right time. He could put himself in the place of the citizen of the border States and feel that any radical move would imperil the cause of freedom itself. This note of human sympathy sounded forth in his first inaugural; it ran throughout his relations with the soldiers during the great war, and animated his last acts as it had his first. The soldiers fighting on the field and dying in the hospital thought of him, and they said to each other: "He cares! He makes us fight, but he cares"; and they fought on as they never would have fought without that warmth of feeling for the head of the Nation.

Looking at the matter from any aspect and at any period of Lincoln's life, the prime cause of his greatness and of our present reverence for him is the fact that he was human in the best and truest sense of that fine word, and this is reason enough why the Nation loves the name of Abraham Lincoln. [Applause.]

Mr. Speaker, the fast-falling shadows of the past leave few names of men not enshrouded by their gloom. Many of the heroes of to-day will be lost to sight in the dimness of the approaching twilight. To-morrow's sun will lighten up new shrines surrounded by tireless hosts of hero worshipers. As we look toward the past, earth's greatest heroes seem in strangest company—Christ and the condemned men, the missionary and the cannibal, Lincoln and the despised black man—there they

stand together in the crowd, on Calvary, surrounded by jeering multitudes; but to-day they are together among the immortals. [Applause.] These saviors of the race will never be forgotten. Lincoln's heart solved more problems than his brain. His very gentleness made him the great emancipator, reconciler, the composite character of the American people. Hope, which is the prophet in every heart, was king and priest besides in his. It ruled his life and consecrated his deeds. Other men turned their backs in despair on the Republic's future; he, through densest darkness, saw with prescient light and gaze the glory of the coming dawn. [Applause.]

In the city of Springfield, in beautiful Oak Ridge Cemetery, he sleeps the sleep of eternity. Many are the times that I have stood with bowed head beside that sacred tomb and thought of the great soul that once inhabited the tenement of clay now moldering into the dust from whence it came. And standing there in the presence of the mighty dead, my faith in humanity has been strengthened and my confidence in the perpetuity of the Republic and its glorious destiny has been made secure. [Applause.]

History tells us that when Robert Bruce, King of Scotland, was dying he asked that his heart be removed from his body and borne by knightly hands to the sacred sepulcher of the Savior. Upon his death the Earl of Douglas, his trusted friend and companion, removed the heart from the body, placed it in a beautiful golden casket, and, surrounding himself with a number of brave young Scotch warriors, they set out on their holy mission. On the way they were attacked by a large body of Moors, who almost overcame them by force of superior numbers. When defeat seemed almost certain, Douglas took in his hand the sacred casket and hurled it far out into the midst of the enemy, shouting:

Lead on, heart of Bruce,
We follow thee!

And the knights of Scotland, never having been defeated when following the leadership of Bruce, took new courage. They rushed upon the enemy with the fury of the whirlwind and gained the day. [Applause.]

To-day when those who, unmindful of the spirit that animated the founders of this Republic, would fan the flames of racial fury and kindle into life the dying embers of bigotry and intolerance; when those who, for base and ignoble purposes of self-exploitation, would place the brand of treason upon the brows of men whose loyalty and devotion in the darkest days of the Nation's life were never questioned—to-day, when the enemies of that broader and better fraternalism, which lies at the very foundation of national peace and national unity, are advancing upon us, the true and loyal citizens of this Republic, of whatever creed or ancestry, catching the inspiration that breathes upon them from the glorious memories of the past, with true American patriotism will take in their hand the great heart of Abraham Lincoln, incase it in their love, and hurl it far out into the midst of the enemy, shouting:

Lead on, heart of Lincoln,
We follow thee;
We follow thee!

[Prolonged applause.]

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